



# COMMUNITY COMMENTS

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## *The Past Rules the Future; But Men Can Create a Great Past\**

BY ARTHUR E. MORGAN

Human greatness is a product of slow, gradual growth, often unnoticed until need or favorable circumstance call it to full expression.

Several years ago a study was made of names in Who's Who in America from Massachusetts as compared with those from Virginia. It was reported that in proportion to population there were several times as many from Massachusetts, though Virginia stood approximately next in order in the nation. Of names in the "Hall of Fame", approximately half are of persons from within a hundred miles of Boston, while those from all Virginia and fifty to one hundred miles beyond its borders are about a third as many.

Was not this difference due in part to the fact that among early settlers to Massachusetts and its environs there were a considerable number, even if a minority, who came in the hope of fulfilling a quite definite pattern of life which they and their forbears, "The Seekers", had pursued for two centuries in rural England? During that long period these humble followers of the teach-

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\*This is the fourth of a series of issues on "Fundamental Principles for Resolving Future Social Crises."

ings of John Wycliffe had lived bravely and persistently for their convictions, against great hardship and persecution. There had slowly developed a ruggedness of character and a clarity of purpose which, in a time and place of freedom and opportunity, sprang into greatness in many fields.

After centuries of seeming inactivity some new development may seem to start things off toward new goals. Then the world looks open, and we seem free to take any course we will. Yet what emerges then will have been largely determined by what went on during the long "uneventful" period. If no great pattern has been formed through the long years, then new opportunity, though free from external restraint, will chiefly reproduce the pattern of the past.

The industrial revolution illustrates this principle. Before it occurred, life for the average man was a hard grind. With steam and machinery there came immense increase in productivity of labor. Had there then been in men's minds a great pattern of purpose, life and action, the lot of men everywhere might have been quickly bettered, with diffusion of education and general culture, and great increase of human dignity and purposefulness.

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However, the new, prosperous industrialist saw no picture to imitate other than that of the privileged feudal baron. That imitation led him to create an industrial feudalism with ostentatious wealth for the few and grinding servitude for the many. For lack of a slowly developed great and fine pattern of a new society, there was lost to both high and low for a long period the joy of a great adventure in building a new world, and there followed a long bitter class struggle. The lack of that vision still clouds our economic life.

And so it has gone through the ages. In ancient Egypt when effective management of agriculture in the Nile valley resulted in vast surplus wealth, the entire nation might have been brought to a high level of economic security, housing, education and culture. But no such picture existed to be fulfilled. Instead, through the despotic course of pyramid building this very abundance was turned into what was perhaps the most cruel and ruthless servitude of a whole people the world has known.

With discovery of atomic energy, because of the lack of a clear picture and conviction, the possibility of vast increase of available power is being turned into a super instrument of fear and hate. As though because they knew that wars are made in the hearts of men, each of the two main powers is intensely engaged in mutual recrimination, and in inciting suspicion, fear and hatred of each other, each forgetting or denying its own barbarities, thereby creating an unreal

impression of contrast to the other. It is almost as though there is a determination to leave no stone unturned to insure that the hearts of men will be in the condition which causes war to occur.

Thus the world finds itself near a crisis with no clear picture of how to turn vast new forces from destruction to beneficence. Such a picture does not emerge suddenly, but is the growth of generations or of centuries. Because there have been glimmerings of such a picture in men's minds and hearts there is possibility that we may pass this crisis safely.

If preparation must be a matter of generations or centuries, how can men ever prepare for the future? How could the people of the year 1300 have been preparing for the discovery of America two centuries later; or in the year 1500 for the industrial revolution, which no one dreamed of; or how from the year 1700 prepare for the age of atomic energy when there was no least hint that such a day would come?

The answer is that whichever of these earth shaking events might occur, the same fundamental preparation would have served the purpose. Had the discovery of America come to men of free minds, of good will, and of a strong sense of social responsibility, there would have been an effort to deal fairly as friends with those already here, and a purpose of making the settlement of the new land an opportunity for establishing its society with justice, good will and a sense of brotherhood. It is largely because some of those who came had such background and purpose that

America did develop qualities of greatness. Had the atomic age come to a world, or to even a single great country, imbued with a spirit of good will, fair play and a strong sense of social responsibility, and with a spirit of inquiry free from mythology, propaganda and emotional bias, there probably would be no menace of atomic war, but a promise of lifting age-long economic burdens.

The same will be true of the future. We do not know what new crises or discoveries will burst upon the human scene, though we have intimations of a few of them. Yet whatever those unheralded comings may be, the same kind of preparation or lack of preparation, or confused mixture of preparation and lack of it, will determine the outcome. We must not neglect the affairs of the moment, yet fundamentally the preparation which in large outline will determine human destiny, including our own, is not the concern of a decade or two, but of generations or centuries.

It does not follow that we must wait for generations or centuries for clear purpose and good motive to bear fruit. We inherit the work of generations past, just as coming generations will inherit ours. Americans in considerable degree have been good neighbors among themselves. In our relations with outsiders we have frequently given evidence of good will and fair play. The urge to take over Mexico because of its minerals and other wealth, which was strong in some economic circles in the first quarter of this century, was successfully resisted by the spirit of

America. Our control of Cuba and the Philippines was not made the occasion for political or economic subjugation. For the most part we have used restraint and good will in dealing with our weak Central American neighbors, and have had an enlightened policy in Puerto Rico. Our actions reflect a considerable degree of human decency, good will and fair play in the American population. However, the times ahead call for far clearer standards of action.

To a very large degree the qualities which make a people great are in the cultural tradition—in the habits, attitudes, convictions and ways of thinking and feeling which are passed from person to person in the life of the community. If we break that thread of transmission, those qualities may disappear. The early Latins, before the founding of Rome, were vigorous, courageous, moral, thrifty, and industrious. Some centuries later the descendants of these same people were indolent, morally lax, craven, and parasitic.

How did such a change come about? As the structure of family and community life disintegrated with the changing conditions of society, those intimate contacts of childhood with parents and neighbors, by which the quality of life is transmitted, no longer existed to such an extent as to perpetuate the more sensitive elements of the culture.

Today more than ever the trend of events, both now and for the long future, calls for clearer insight, outlook and judgment. Yet in this

period of great need we are faced with a wide spread tendency to decay of family and community life through which the best elements of our culture have been preserved and refined. These are not the conditions which preserve and refine those qualities of greatness by which people meet great crises.

America does have strong elements of fine quality. If these can be kept vigorous and can be increased, our country may rise to the level of the issues which beset us and to those other issues of perhaps even greater import which as yet are not above the horizon. Some feasible steps to that end will be discussed in the next issue of COMMUNITY COMMENTS.

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Community Service has visitors coming for counsel from East and West Africa, New Zealand, Australia, Japan, India, Germany, and England. The chief Indian Engineering magazine presents our views; the Ghandi organization is publishing "The Community of the Future" in English and in Hindi. The Velland (India) community project, which we helped start and are trying to support, is growing beyond expectation.

Thus work for Community also serves international good will. But mostly we serve Americans who come or write for counsel on community development, small industry, housing, education, health or old age in the community.

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